DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 409 864 IR 018 453

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TITLE	Ethics in Scholarly Communications: Intellectual Property and New Technologies.
PUB DATE	97
NOTE	3p.; In: Proceedings of Selected Research and Development Presentations at the 1997 National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (19th, Albuquerque, NM, February 14-18, 1997); see IR 018 421.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Codes of Ethics; *Computer Mediated Communication; *Ethics; Higher Education; *Information Dissemination; Information Technology; Integrity; Intellectual Property; Internet; Misconceptions; Privacy; *Problems; Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS	Collaborative Research; Electronic Media; *Professional Ethics; Research Ethics; *Scholarly Communication; Scholarly Writing

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses professional ethical concerns for individuals conducting research in electronic collaborative environments. Existing professional codes of ethics were reviewed, and respected figures in the field of educational technology were engaged in conversations about ethics, professional communication, and new technologies. When professional ethics codes dealt with scholarly communications directly, it usually was with regard to ensuring professional competence, protecting the client, and protecting the profession. Each of these relate to electronic communications because new channels are available for interaction via the Internet that open up possibilities for representing and misrepresenting individual and organizational characteristics. The Code of Ethics for the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) offers some guidance in at least three areas relevant to the Internet: to protect privacy and personal integrity, to distinguish between personal and organizational views, and to give credit where credit is due. While organizations may have once controlled the proliferation of information, in the electronic age, each individual becomes an emissary, potentially influencing the views of others toward an organization. Another issue involves protecting the client and the profession against misrepresentation by individuals of their professional competence or organizational affiliation. Perhaps the most important finding is that there is an inherent conflict between giving credit, and protecting privacy; it is sometimes impossible to do both at the same time. Organizations must develop their own policies, and ask if existing ethical codes address the use of new "interactive" technologies. (AEF)

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Abstract

This paper discusses professional ethical concerns for individuals conducting research in electronic collaborative environments. In order to explore this issue, the author reviewed existing professional codes of ethics and engaged respected figures in the field of educational technology in conversations about ethics, professional communication, and new technologies. Findings are presented concerning existing codes of conduct and challenges posed by new technologies.

Introduction

This paper is the result of a unique opportunity to examine ethical issues as part of a graduate-level class on research methods. If graduate students are not exhorted to consider ethical behavior as a part of their training, it is doubtful that this will be considered in their professional careers. Thus, students should have a chance to consider professional ethics as part of their training.

Background

The question of professional ethics is one that has been addressed by numerous professional organizations. For an overview, please refer to a meta-analysis of professional codes of ethics provided by Kultgen (1988). Only some of the professional ethics codes pertain directly to scholarly communications, notably --

1) ensuring professional competence
2) protecting the client, and
3)protecting the profession.

Each of these relate to electronic communications because new channels are available for interaction via the Internet that open up possibilities for representing and misrepresenting individual and organizational characteristics. Electronic interactions can change the relationship between professional practitioners and clients. Can existing codes of professional ethics manage this change, or do they need to be updated? The Code of Ethics for AECT offers some guidance in at least three areas relevant to the Internet:

1) to protect privacy and personal integrity, and to
2) distinguish between personal and organizational views, and,
3) to give credit where credit is due.

Findings

All of these are issues for the electronic age. At the same time that one benefits from using e-mail as a means of communication, representing the ideas of individuals and organizations becomes a sensitive issue. While organizations may have once controlled the proliferation of information, in the electronic age each individual becomes an emissary, potentially influencing the views of others toward an organization. It is common to see disclaimers at the bottom of e-mail messages stating that the views expressed belong to the individual, not the individual's organizational affiliation. However, this line can become blurred and coordination between co-workers within an organization may become a thorny issue as messages are communicated across the Internet. It is unclear whether policies governing employee use of the Internet can adequately address this issue without stifling external communications. It seems safest to assume that an individual is speaking for himself, unless it is explicitly stated that an organizational position is being offered.

Another issue involves protecting the client and the profession against misrepresentation by individuals of their professional competence or organizational affiliation. Even the "reality" of who an individual is, or who said what, can be obscured via electronic communications as individuals become more like disembodied beings. Clearly

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in the context of professional communications representing accurately who one is in a communication, including one's institution and credentials, is essential. The ability to know who one is talking to, and properly identifying who said what, would be a requirement for ethical and professional behavior. In many cases, people may unwittingly or intentionally wrongly attribute the source of a statement.

Furthermore, one hopes that individuals maintain ownership of their ideas when these are shared online. Schrum (1995) writes that people do have ownership of their communications, and should be able to modify them if they want -- they should be informed if someone is researching their communications, and for what purposes.

Perhaps the most important finding is that there is an inherent conflict between giving credit, and protecting privacy. It is impossible to do both at the same time. This becomes an issue as personal communication proliferates and becomes easily reproducible. Under some circumstances it may be ethical to cite someone by name, while under different circumstances it is necessary to protect their identity. For example, it is necessary to give credit to the ideas of others, but perhaps this is only acceptable with their permission. The generally accepted practice seems to be to ask permission to cite e-mail communications in a paper. However, what about reproducing group discussions? Dr. Lloyd Rieber, from University of Georgia, is owner of a listserv called ITForum. While information from this listserv could be broadly useful if disseminated more widely, making this information easily accessible might violate the spirit of the original discussions. "Would we need to get permission from all of the people who participated (potentially hundreds from all over the world)? (Rieber, personal communication, 11/8/96). Because the postings were already available via the Internet, ITForum feels it acceptable to make them more easily available via the World Wide Web, but they are making efforts to protect authors who might not have anticipated their writings being shared more widely, particularly if the material was sensitive or personal (Rieber, et al., 1997).

Organizations must develop their own policies, and ask if existing ethical codes address the use of new "interactive" technologies. The null hypothesis would be that existing intellectual property guidelines are sufficient. Schrum, who has written extensively on this issue tends to agree with the latter notion: "We are not really changing our views of intellectual property, but rather some individuals feel that they do not need to abide by them anymore. I don't mean to sound as if things are rampant, but there is a definite and growing view that anything on the web or in digital form is fine to use/modify/duplicate" (Schrum, personal communication, 11/9/96).

Conclusion

In the end, the profession is not responsible for individual behavior; individuals are. The Chair of the Professional Ethics Committee for AECT, Dr. Andrew Yeaman, has indicated that ethical issues exist within a larger framework within society. Professional ethics are only one way of controlling people based on the status of the profession in society. Appeals also must be made to individuals, groups, and society at large.

Professional ethics reflect the ethical concerns in society at large. There are larger ethical concerns involving the social changes taking place as a result of new technologies, issues that go beyond professional practice alone to the larger social and ethical effects of the computer age (Kizza, 1996). For example, while some have argued that electronic communications can foster a Jeffersonian democracy, Yeaman points out that no one ever asked whether anyone wanted this! Such an irony for Jeffersonian idealists!

Society has a lot to grapple with, and so do scholars who seek to benefit from this medium in the context of professional and ethical practice. The literature on professional ethics seems like a logical starting place, but it may be necessary to move beyond current thinking to meet the challenges of new interactive environments.

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